Communicative Methods for Using Literature in the EFL Classroom

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1. Introduction

Literature is an ideal source of material for the communicative foreign language classroom. This statement may seem counterintuitive, but it is not controversial. Recent theoretical support for the position can be traced back to McKay (1982) and to Krashen (1982), the latter describing optimal input as having the following characteristics:

> Optimal input focuses the acquirer on the message and not on form. To go a step further, the best input is so interesting and relevant that the acquirer may even "forget" that the message is encoded in a foreign language. Creating materials and providing input that meet this characteristic may appear to be an easy and obvious task, but my view is that, in reality, this requirement is not easy to meet, nor has the profession considered it obvious. It is very difficult to present and discuss topics of interest to a class of people whose goals, interests, and backgrounds differ from the teacher's and from each other's. (pp. 66-67)

Krashen goes on to contend (e.g., pp. 166-169) that literature is one of the best sources for material meeting these requirements. McKay argues similarly, seeing literature as "an ideal vehicle for illustrating language use and for introducing cultural assumptions" (p. 536). Since 1982, a large number of SLA researchers have written to agree with them. Khatib, Rezaei and Derakhshan (2011) provide an extensive review of the SLA literature over the last thirty years, finding nearly sixty books and articles in support of the use literary texts in the ESL/EFL classroom. Arguments in favor include language authenticity, the wide variety of subject matter/topics, and the breadth and depth of the cultural/intercultural insights provided.

Reading has also been shown to be one of the most efficient means of acquiring an adequate vocabulary and knowledge of advanced grammar. Krashen (1993, p. 23) sees it as "the only way" we acquire these--with the classroom discussion of this reading seen important as both as a source of interesting input and as a good medium for critical thinking enhancement. Finally, as Gajdusek (1988) also notes, the very

nature (less explicitly contextualized, more consciously patterned and less linear than texts intended merely to convey information) of a literary text—by mirroring real-life interactions—makes reading them a more authentic language experience:

> In reading literature we assume, since there is no access to the physical world outside the text, that each line is meant to interrelate with the others to create an internally coherent meaning. Therefore, we are immediately obliged to engage in procedures of interpretation; we negotiate meaning and set about making sense of expressions by referring them to other parts of the text (discourse) in which they occur. (p. 230)

In other words, the very unease engendered by the experience (approximating real-life language encounters where participants must make their own on-the-spot connections and interpretations) of reading these texts gives them a "unique advantage" as an EFL material.

Still, the use of literary texts in the EFL/ESL classroom remains relatively rare. Gajdusek (1988), Kuse (2011) and McKay (1982), among others, have written about this phenomenon. Paran (2008) discusses the issue at some length, detailing "the misunderstandings between literature teachers and language teachers, including incidents of actual hostility" (p. 4). As dean of Miyazaki International College, and again as head of the Foreign Languages Division at Iwate National University, I had to survey foreign language faculty about their use of materials; with one exception, out of 61 (including part-time) teachers at both institutions, zero reported using literary texts. The given rationales echo those summarized in Khatib, Rezaei & Derakhshan (2011): In addition to concerns about difficult vocabulary, they listed cultural barriers, student unfamiliarity with literary concepts, and the ostensibly large gap between literary and academic English as the main reasons.

Interestingly enough, all teachers surveyed also mentioned the challenges in finding good material for their classes. Indeed, this is one of the perennial topics in SLA literature: How to find material authentic yet accessible, neutral (in the sense of taking neither an overtly nationalistic nor a polemically religious/political stance) yet conducive to discussion, and intellectually challenging yet personally relevant to as broad a spectrum of students as possible. As argued in the studies referenced above, literary texts should in theory provide an inexhaustible supply of materials fitting these requirements.

The issue, of course, is how to use these texts in the classroom. Many of the

authors referred to above include suggestions about how to do this; however, these suggestions tend toward broad statements of theory peppered with specific activities which have worked for the writer in question--the latter what Paran (2008), referencing Edmondson (1997), calls the 'Look at this!' argument. The problem with methodology presented in this fashion is the difficulty in replicating it; the suggestions are viable, often excellent, but shared without context—specifically, the preparation necessary to ensure a classroom environment where the fruitful discussion of these texts is possible.

This author has used literature successfully for over twenty years. Below, I share methodology which incorporates the usage of literary texts in a specific context (Japan), with discussion of the Japan-specific educational and cultural hurdles that need to be overcome before these activities can work. Note that, for the purposes of this chapter, the following discussion distinguishes between literature and expository prose, though echoing Gajdusek (1988), it is important to state at the outset that exposition and literature "may be viewed more profitably as overlapping segments on a continuum." Similarly, the challenges that literature poses for students and the teaching solutions proposed below will often apply equally to interactive classroom work with expository texts as well. Similarly, while the context discussed is Japanese, the general issues in question, not to mention the nature of the preparation described, are also applicable to a variety of situations.

1.1 The context

The weaknesses of the English education system in Japan have been discussed at length in literally hundreds of articles. Until recently, the language of instruction for these classes was Japanese, with English used either sparingly or not at all. Lecture was the preferred mode of instruction, with classroom discussion rarely encouraged (and often not welcome). Yakudoku exercises—i.e., teacher led and dominated line-by-line translation—were the main (and sometimes only) learning activities students encountered in the six years leading up to their entrance into college. Moreover, students were rarely given the opportunity to individually negotiate text meanings; instead, teachers in many cases simply dictated "correct" (a problematic concept with literary texts) answers in Japanese to the students, whose role was to take notes to be regurgitated verbatim on tests. Finally, note that many of these issues could be found even in Japanese literature classes, with their long tradition of teacher-centered classrooms and non-text-centered and non-analytical lecture (Asakura, 1993; Hatano, 1993; Inoue, 1993; MEXT, 2005a; Mulvey, 1999; Sakamoto, 1995), the substance of

which students were expected to memorize as well.

A common misconception about English education in Japan regarded the ostensible focus on reading and writing (as opposed to oral) skills--giving rise to the oft-repeated idea that "Japanese students can read and write but not speak." Nothing could have been further from the reality. Ibarayama (1998), MEXT (2005a; 2005b), Mulvey (1999, 2001) as well as Mulvey and Ogawa (2014)—citing numerous other studies—have documented that Japanese students traditionally spent very little time reading, and often no time writing, English. Note that Carrell (e.g., 1987, p. 24), among others, has long argued that "both top-down and bottom-up strategies operating interactively" are necessary for students to be successful readers; most Japanese students received instruction in neither: skimming and/or guessing from context strategies were neither encouraged nor explained, and scripts, schemes, and the use of students' background knowledge or experiences were not addressed. More to the point, word relationships (such as between synonyms and/or antonyms) were also not taught, and a significant percentage of students never learned to use a dictionary effectively by themselves. The result, in many cases, was a passive student population with weak analytical reading skills even in the L1, not to mention students unwilling and/or unable to engage in English-language discussion inside or outside the classroom.

Since at least 1987 (Daigaku Shingikai, 2000), Japan's Ministry of Education (MEXT) has been advocating improvements to the English education system. These improvements include the initiation of the JET Programme (providing native English speakers to assist with classroom conversation activities) that same year, as well as substantial changes to university entrance exam focus and content. These reforms have accelerated since 2004, with the Education Ministry now promoting "eigo o tsuujite" (learning through English)—in other words, the usage of English as a tool for academic discovery (see MEXT, 2004a; 2004b; 2004c; 2005a; 2005b; 2006; 2009; 2010; 2012; 2013; etc.). Specific policy changes to achieve this include adding an extensive listening comprehension section to the "Center" university entrance exams (2006), requiring high school English classes to be taught in English (first mentioned in 2008, then codified in 2010), as well as the recent "Super Global" initiatives ostensibly designed to ensure Japan's research and educational competitiveness "on a global stage." English classes have accordingly become both more communicative and more focused on critical thinking and academic English skills, with ALTs (typically English native speakers) playing an increased role as well.

In this author's experience, the result has been a student population with

increased interest in learning about other countries and cultures, as well as one much more willing and able to participate in classroom discussions. That said, as Kuse (2011), MEXT (2005a; 2005b; 2009; 2010; 2012; 2013) not to mention, Mulvey and Ogawa (2014)—again among many others—also suggest, corresponding improvements in reading and writing skill instruction have yet to be achieved. Specific issues relevant to this chapter include a lack of exposure to authentic texts, a lack of instruction in literary concepts (plot, setting, point-of-view, metaphor/simile, symbol and theme), and an extremely superficial (when not incorrect) introduction to the cultures and traditions of countries outside of Japan—the latter resulting in students often lacking the cultural background knowledge necessary to make key connections and recognize implied meanings. Hence, the successful use of literary texts in EFL classrooms in a Japan-context must address these issues as well.

2. Text selection

McKay (1982) argues that careful text selection is "the key" to the successful usage of literature in an L2 classroom, highlighting as well the difficulties involved with making these selections. Numerous studies since have further addressed these challenges; Bagherkazemi and Alemi (2010) distill this extensive discussion into three major issues:

1. Reading difficulty (including lexical and stylistic complexity)
2. Subject matter
3. Thematic content

The first issue is self-explanatory, mirroring as it does Krashen's admonishment that input be comprehensible. McKay, with some hesitation, proposes using either simplified texts or young adult texts because they are stylistically less complex. However, as McKay also notes, the simplification process itself "tends to produce a homogenized product in which the information becomes diluted" (p. 531). In addition to making the contents less interesting, said simplification may in fact reduce cohesion and readability, as "additional words in the text tend to spread the information out rather than to localize the information" (p. 532). Finally, McKay warns that especially with regards to young adult fiction, the texts "tend to be relatively short," with "the characters usually limited to a small cast of characters with a young adult as the central character" (p. 532). She sees these elements as lessening the linguistic challenges posed by these texts, potentially limiting their usage as well.

McKay's commonsense suggestions are oft-repeated in SLA literature. However, let me interject here specific discussion of the Japanese context. As referenced above, and as Mulvey (1999) and Takagaki (2002) also note, while many Japanese students have an interest in reading, few have actually read an authentic (non-simplified) English-language text (including expository prose) in its entirety during the six years of English study before high school graduation. Accordingly, when first asked to read such material, there can be hesitation, to include a lack of confidence in their ability to finish, let alone comprehend the meaning of, the text itself. Indeed, even with graded readers with a Gunning fog index of 8 or less, students initially resist reading when confronted with texts extending beyond two or so pages. Note that this initial resistance is a reoccurring theme in class evaluations as well—students consistently report being extremely hesitant at first to attempt the readings, with length cited as an issue at least twice as much as lexical complexity.

In my experience, this last point is critical: students respond better initially to short (1-2 page) works. Even with intermediate (TOEIC 500-600) classes, these texts can be challenging (I have used texts as high as a Gunning fog index of 11) as long as the length is kept within these constraints. Accordingly, my solution has been to begin each semester with short readings (an example is provided below) that feature authentic English; once they prove (to themselves more than I) that they can handle this material, I then provide further material of greater length. Time and again, my students have risen to this challenge.

Which brings us to the issues of subject matter and theme. While seemingly interconnected, they actually represent very distinct challenges. For instance, again in the Japanese context, subject matter incorporating an overtly political stance on a contemporary issue (e.g. "comfort women," the ongoing Fukushima nuclear disaster or ownership of the Senkaku Islands) tends to alienate students regardless of the position articulated by the author, often rendering discussion impossible. Still themes (in the sense of the stance or idea about a particular topic which the author presents to the reader) need to be challenging enough to hold student interest and stimulate discussion (even debate). Finally, it is important to select subject matter and themes with which students can identify. Literature that deals with human relationships, questions of personal identity, love and loss—not to mention individual struggles with understanding different languages and cultures—have all worked well for me.

3. Preparing for discussion

Given the weaknesses of the Japanese education system delineated above, it stands to reason that students here will need assistance before being able to read and discuss literary works productively. Below, I discuss this preparation.

3.1 Pre-reading activities

As Gajdusek (1988) also notes, students may need to be familiarized with new grammar and vocabulary, particularly any usage which likely will not be understood through context or relying on a dictionary. And certainly, having students study such usages before encountering them in the text will improve sentence-level comprehension. However, pre-reading for my classes chiefly refers to learning more about the "context" in which the work itself was written. Insufficient understanding of the background--including cultural and period-specific issues—informing a particular work renders it incomprehensible even to very proficient students. As students can do this research at home—and as they typically enjoy learning about other periods and/or cultures—I tend to make this homework, assigning questions that they can research on their own, with answers that will both illuminate the text under study and elicit more enthusiastic discussion. Indeed, the discussion of their answers often can take up a class by itself.

3.2 In-class close reading

After achieving a better understanding of the context in which the liferary work was written, we move to a close reading of the text itself. As much as possible, this discussion should be student-driven and focused. Can they explain in other words what a particular phrase means? Can they describe what happened in this or that paragraph? Why do they think a particular grammatical choice was made by the author? And finally, are there any questions—any words or passages that they cannot understand? This process also can be time-consuming, sometimes taking multiple classes. However, it is a critical building-block in the process of preparing them to discuss the work as literature, not to mention helping them become better readers of that literature.

4. Discussing the text

Once an appropriate text has been selected and understood, it can then be discussed as a work of literature, with attention paid to such literary concepts as point-of-view, metaphor/simile, symbol and theme. However, in saying this, it is critical

to remember that neither these discussions nor the class itself should focus on teaching the "study" of literature. Similarly, the purpose of any discussions should be less on finding a "correct" interpretation of theme, and more on facilitating student interest in, and understanding of, the issues raised via the work, not to mention the variety of possible stances that can be taken vis-à-vis this subject matter (several of which can often be supported from the text itself). In other words, literary concepts become tools that allow the productive discussion of a text, allowing multiple angles from which a work can be viewed and understood. Finally, as much as possible, students need to be allowed the freedom to find and articulate their own personal interpretations of the text, with evaluation (i.e., grades) focusing on the quantity and quality of support for their positions (and not their proximity to the teacher's personal understanding of the story under discussion).

In a way, this advocates a reader-response view of literature, though more in the sense of Wolfgang Iser than Stanley Fish. In other words, and like Iser (e.g., 1980), a text exists, albeit one with a meaning that the reader co-creates. While students will necessarily view the text partly through their own cultural filters, their interpretations cannot solely be the sum of these non-text experiences. In practice, this limits the possible interpretations to those supportable with direct references to the text itself. I.e., while students' individual experiences and knowledge of the world will (rightly) influence their readings, the text cannot be forgotten when defending the veracity of those readings.

In closing, the following best teaching practices and predispositions should always be utilized as well: 1) Have realistic expectations, 2) Try to involve everyone in class discussions, 3) Recognize/praise contributions, 4) Expose students to multiple viewpoints, 5) Always ask students "why?" they favor a particular interpretation, and most importantly, 6) Emphasize the necessity of "effective" support, that no matter how creative their thought, it has to be backed up by quotes/support from the text itself. Regarding the first point, again, as this is not a literature class, the focus should be on L12 acquisition and use; students most likely will not have mastered—nor should they be expected to master--the various critical approaches to literature. Moreover, as Waring & Takaki (2003) have demonstrated, there are limits to the new vocabulary and grammar that students can retain in the course of single semester; sometimes the best result from reading (and discussing that reading) is the development and enrichment of already known vocabulary and grammar.

Finally, in the Japanese context at least, as discussed above, most students will

have had little to no experience discussing even L1 literature. Also, they tend to lack experience with critical thinking and formulating arguments supported with evidence. Hence, at least initially, they will need modeling of proper practices, reinforcement of these practices through teacher questions and comments—and above all, encouragement. Again, I am not suggesting that the teachers' role is to accept all student opinions without critical comment. Even in a so-called student-centered class, the teacher's input—including questions and comments—remains vital. This said, setting artificial limits on student interpretations too often results in silent classrooms—and in learners who fail to master independent, critical thought.

5. An example

At just one page in length, and with a Gunning fog index of 8, James Thurber's "The Unicorn in the Garden" is a favorite choice of mine to begin each semester. (See Appendix 1 for the full text.) Below, I provide specific examples of the kinds of questions I assign students to enable them to understand and discuss the work itself.

Pre-reading questions:

1. What does "mythical" mean? Be prepared to give examples.
2. "Booby" can refer to a type of bird. Where does the name for this bird come from, and why?
3. What does the phrase "Don't count your chickens before they hatch" mean? Have you ever been guilty of this?
4. What was the social and political status of women at the time (1939) of this story? For example, in what circumstances could they divorce? What potential problems were there? See these sites:
   http://www.wic.org/misc/history.htm
   http://blog.glencoe.com/blog/2010/04/01/history-of-women%E2%80%99s-rights-in-america/
   http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divorce_in_the_United_States
   http://www.articledashboard.com/Article/The-History-Of-Divorce-In-The-US/971637

Close-reading questions:

1. What are the wife's feelings for her husband? Give 3 examples from the story to support your opinion.

2. What adjectives would you use to describe the husband? Why?
3. What does it mean to have a "gloat" in one's eye? Why does the wife have such a thing?
4. How do the police officer and psychiatrist respond to the wife's testimony? Do they respond differently to the husband?

Class discussion questions:

1. Who is this story's hero, and why?
2. What is the conflict in this story? Is there more than one conflict? Please explain.
3. What might the unicorn symbolize? Does the husband actually see a unicorn (or does he at least really believe he saw one)?
4. What do you think is the real moral of this story? For example, is what happens to the wife fair?
5. What is the theme? In other words, what if anything is the author trying to teach us about relationships and/or the nature of the society at that time?

With regards to the latter discussion, most students argue that the hero of "The Unicorn in the Garden" is the husband, with the story's theme accordingly one of the following: 1) goodness is rewarded (and badness punished), 2) do not make plans prematurely, or 3) men are better than women. The husband would seem to be the hero because he appears at both the very beginning and at the very end of the story, with most of the action in between told from his point of view. For example, the reader sees both the unicorn ("white" with a "golden horn" and "grave" manner) and the wife ("unfriendly" and "cold") almost exclusively through the husband's eyes. Moreover, the reader has access solely to the husband's thoughts, including his emotional response to his wife's words (which he does not like) and his feelings of joy at the end (where we learn the husband will live "happily ever after").

Accordingly, it's pretty easy to argue that this is really the husband's story. As for the first possible theme, the husband's goodness is both recognized and rewarded right at the beginning with the appearance of the unicorn (which traditionally show themselves only to good and pure people). His goodness is further illustrated by his repeated attempts to share this special experience with his wife—despite her obvious dislike of him. The husband is rewarded for his efforts with a happy life, ironically made possible at least partly because of his repeated attempts to win his wife's love.

The wife, on the other hand, is punished both for her rebuffs of his efforts and for her attempt at betrayal—the psychiatrist and policeman refuse to believe her words, immediately arresting her, and then placing her in a mental asylum for the rest of her life.

However, the extreme, and very unfair, treatment the wife receives hints at another possible thematic interpretation: A criticism of the power imbalance and gender discrimination that existed at that time. Evidence in support of this reading can be found by looking more closely at the causes and results of the two main characters' actions. Certainly, an interpretation defending man's ostensible superiority over woman can be made from the varying reactions to the husband and the wife. The husband is visited by a unicorn, who treats him "gravely" (i.e., with respect); furthermore, his word is believed by the psychiatrist and the policeman without question. On the other hand, the unicorn never appears to the wife, and her story is not believed at all—even though she spoke the truth.

All this could certainly be interpreted to suggest that the author feels that women deserved their secondary status at that time, with the status quo validated both by human (a psychiatrist and policeman) and magical (a unicorn) authority figures. However, it is the "even though she spoke the truth" statement which seemingly calls into question the legitimacy of the above thematic interpretation. In other words, how can the husband symbolize nobility and goodness, rewarded by visits from unicorns and the unquestioning respect of psychiatrists and policemen, when the fact is that, in this story, he is the only one who lies? It is then that we remember how, at this time in American history, women had a much lower social/legal status and suffered sometimes-extreme discrimination.

Furthermore, note that our understanding of (and dislike for) the wife comes chiefly from the descriptions we receive of her appearance and actions—both overwhelming told from the husband's (i.e., the liar's) point of view. Finally, note that after the husband seemingly makes his decision to betray his wife ("We'll see about that"), the unicorn disappears, further implying at least the possibility of authorial disapproval of the husband's behavior. Accordingly, it could also be argued that the wife is the hero/victim of this story, symbolizing the plight of women in that period. In other words, and symbolic of the women of that time, the wife is viewed/judged here solely by men, with her statements not believed by authorities, and her rights to due process ignored. While our kneejerk first reaction to reading this story is often to feel happy for the "kind" husband's victory, upon deeper reflection, it is clearly possible to

interpret the story as both a rendering, and criticism, of the inequality and sexism of that time.

Each year a small number of my students, after looking at the historical and social context background surrounding the work, argue something similar to the above. What invariably follows is a fruitful discussion of not just differing values and cultures—and not just the meaning of this one text—but of the nature of discourse itself.

6. Conclusion

It has been the point of this chapter that literature, when properly presented, provides one of the best sources of material for generating discussion, sparking student interest, improving student vocabulary levels, and broadening and deepening their cross-cultural understanding. When combined with the judicious selection of text, the result is usually a classroom where students come to see literature as an ideal vehicle for illustrating language use, not to mention an opportunity to better their understanding of not just "foreign" culture, but their own as well.

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Appendix 1

The Unicorn in the Garden

By James Thurber (reprinted from *Fables for Our Time*)

Once upon a sunny morning a man who sat in a breakfast nook looked up from his scrambled eggs to see a white unicorn with a golden horn quietly cropping the roses in the garden. The man went up to the bedroom where his wife was still asleep and woke her. "There's a unicorn in the garden," he said. "Eating roses." She opened one unfriendly eye and looked at him.

"The unicorn is a mythical beast," she said, and turned her back on him. The man walked slowly downstairs and out into the garden. The unicorn was still there; now he was browsing among the tulips. "Here, unicorn," said the man, and he pulled up a lily and gave it to him. The unicorn ate it gravely. With a high heart, because there was a unicorn in his garden, the man went upstairs and roused his wife again. "The unicorn," he said, "ate a lily." His wife sat up in bed and looked at him coldly. "You are a booby," she said, "and I am going to have you put in the booby-hatch."

The man, who had never liked the words "booby" and "booby-hatch," and who liked them even less on a shining morning when there was a unicorn in the garden, thought for a moment. "We'll see about that," he said. He walked over to the door. "He has a golden horn in the middle of his forehead," he told her. Then he went back to the garden to watch the unicorn; but the unicorn had gone away. The man sat down among the roses and went to sleep.

As soon as the husband had gone out of the house, the wife got up and dressed as fast as she could. She was very excited and there was a gloat in her eye. She telephoned the police and she telephoned a psychiatrist; she told them to hurry to her house and bring a strait-jacket. When the police and the psychiatrist arrived they sat down in chairs and looked at her, with great interest.

"My husband," she said, "saw a unicorn this morning." The police looked at the psychiatrist and the psychiatrist looked at the police. "He told me it ate a lily," she said. The psychiatrist looked at the police and the police looked at the psychiatrist. "He told me it had a golden horn in the middle of its forehead," she said. At a solemn signal from the psychiatrist, the police leaped from their chairs and seized the wife. They had a hard time subduing her, for she put up a terrific struggle, but they finally subdued her.